

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Got Friends, Now What?

When I was a little boy, we had a dog who chased cars. My grandmother used to say, “What would he do with a car if he ever caught one?” By now we’ve all been told that social marketing is the future and we’d better get on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. It’s probably good advice. But like that poor mutt, no one has told us what to do when we get there.

The benefits of LinkedIn for retailers, except as a recruiting tool, are dubious. And unless you have an immediate, compelling message that can be communicated in 140 characters, Twitter’s probably not useful. (“UPS delivered a fresh shipment of valve oil and bow rosin!” Who cares?) But Facebook is a dream come true for retailers who want to engage their communities. And best of all, it’s free, easy and fun.

The biggest misconception about Facebook is that it’s for young people. Certainly, there are teens and young adults on FB, but there are also many adults and grandparents. “It’s the best way to know what our grandkids are up to, and I even see pictures,” said a silver-haired lady with a MacBook in her lap at a local Starbucks. (I was shocked to learn on FB recently that my granddaughter is in a relationship.) Facebook’s demographics are vast, but more important, those demographics align with our customers.

THE VIRTUAL BLOCK PARTY

Before jumping into social marketing, there are a few things a wise businessperson should consider. Correspondents on Facebook are called *friends*, and the network is called *social*. This implies all the norms of polite social interaction. Think of FB as a virtual, hybrid cocktail party/block party/Thanksgiving dinner. All the manners and customs appropriate to those functions apply. There are things you wouldn’t say out loud at a cocktail party without appearing boorish — how much money you made

today or your political and religious views. And there are things you wouldn’t do at a block party — pass out business cards or show pictures of products you have for sale. But there are things you might want to communicate to an individual or a small group, and fortunately, Facebook has a semiprivate Message feature for this purpose.

Since we are talking to friends at a social function, we need to consider what friends might find interesting and appropriate. Generally, people find the same things interesting on FB that they would in a conversation. They

like to hear about news, laugh, and see pictures and videos. They don’t like to be offended or embarrassed, and they think people with poor grammar who can’t spell are stupid. They don’t like people who are boring or who try to sell them something.

A look at music stores’ Facebook pages is revealing. There’s an amazing amount of diversity. Obviously, no one has written the book on how to do this, so every page is an experiment. Many of the experiments, like any evolving mechanism, are miserable failures. A few are wonderful surprises. There’s very little in between.

Quite a few companies, and some really big ones, treat a Facebook page as a little Web site. They create a profile and think they’re done. There are no posts. This is fatal. If you don’t talk to your friends, there’s no reason for them to listen or engage. One of the best things about Facebook is the e-mail we receive when someone comments or clicks “like” on our post. Unless we place posts designed to elicit responses, valuable impression opportunities are lost, and relationships languish. So, if you have a Facebook page, use it. And use it often, but not too often. Twice a day might be too much, but once a week usually isn’t enough, and once a month makes you look lazy.



Facebook is a dream come true for retailers wanting to enhance relationships with customers, prospects

POLITICS & RELIGION

Some smaller users seem confused about the distinction between a personal page and a business fan page. Your customers are not interested in pictures of your kids' little league games or what you had for dinner, and you may not want them to know about your new Mercedes. So keep your personal and fan pages isolated from each other.

I know a local music teacher who has loaded her page with right-wing political posts, links to support her opposition to childhood vaccinations and other conspiracy theories. It never occurred to her that some parents might be concerned about exposing their kids to unvaccinated children in music class or would shun a

teacher they perceived to be a wing nut.

We live in a highly polarized political time. About 40 percent of the population is committed to one party or the other, and the big picture divides about 50/50. If a businessperson takes a partisan political position in public, at least half his customers will disagree with it, and one in five will disagree vehemently. Most people are uncomfortable and offended when politics comes up at all. Religion is even more polarizing. Taking a political position when you don't have to is a helluva way to cultivate business or nurture relationships. Since most people assume we agree with them until informed otherwise, there's absolutely no upside to spouting off on Facebook.

I've tried to convince this teacher that she's better off cultivating the image of sweet music education advocate lady rather than that of crazy wing nut lady. So far, she's sticking to her First Amendment rights, and of course, her practice is languishing. The lesson for the rest of us is that a Facebook page can be used to establish and enhance a store's or individual's image, stature or reputation. Or, it can define you as a nut, a shill or someone who flunked eighth-grade grammar. It's a blank slate, and you can paint any picture you choose.

AVOID PITCHES

Some Facebook pages are just one long commercial. One page I found served as a catalog, with each post pre-

senting a different product. Who wants to look at that? It's OK to post a sales message once in a while, especially if it's for a truly unique product. But if that's all there is, the page becomes the Home Shopping Network, and your friends will tune out (i.e. "defriend" you, in modern vernacular). The best way to send a specific call-to-action sales message is with Facebook's Message feature. It sends your subjects an e-mail notification of the message and avoids having the post haunt your page long after it's relevant.

The most counterproductive thing a page can do is brag. Nobody cares how successful your sale was except your banker. People who would never talk to customers

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about how great business is or what their top salesman sold today seem to think it's appropriate behavior on FB. It's not.

Today's consumers have a limited tolerance for commercial messages and commercialism, in general. It's best to tread lightly in this social environment and provide more interesting content and do less overt selling. Posts about upcoming clinics, recitals and concerts thread the needle nicely. They are commercial but not overtly so. No one's going to object to an occasional selling message if you have established a pattern of interesting, funny, uplifting and relevant posts.

I actually used FB to sell a piano recently but in a very personal way. One of my clients was away at her summer home when I came across a piano just right for her. We made a video of a kid playing

the instrument and posted it. Then, I sent her a private message with a link to the post. This was definitely using the site as a sales tool, but all the other friends saw a cute video of a kid playing the piano.

FACEBOOK DO'S

There are many other creative ways to use Facebook. Here are just a few.

People love pictures. Take pics at events in your store, and post them immediately. If something unusual or special comes in, take a pic and post it. Tell everyone at your clinic or recital that you will be posting their pictures on your page, and hand out cards with your Facebook address. Take pictures of happy customers with their new instruments, post them and encourage your customers to share them with their friends. A few months

ago, a red-tailed hawk tried to get through our glass door. Our friends loved that picture.

If a customer wants you to e-mail a picture of an instrument, post it to FB instead and send the customer a link. (Try to get him in the picture with the instrument.) This eliminates the inevitable attachment problem and drives prospects to your page, where they can see all your other interesting posts.

People love video, too. Post little snippets of things going on in your store, such as recitals, service guys doing an interesting procedure, a customer playing really well, a cute kid playing not as well or a special visitor (even a rep). Post a video of one of your favorite songs, a YouTube link related to a product, a customer or employee giggling, or a tricky delivery or installation. There are great video links at namm.com and many suppliers' sites. It doesn't have to be fancy, and it shouldn't be long. And did I mention it's all free?

Adding a video link of a clinician or performer to a post announcing his upcoming event can make the effort much more effective and will get more shares — and reservations (which FB will track for you).

Facebook can be the perfect adjunct to a Web site. Many of our Web sites have current event pages with either no current events or an upcoming event from three years ago. Using a Facebook link at the current events page, and keeping FB fresh, solves this problem in a relevant, engaging way. A call to action, such as "follow us on Facebook here," increases the number of clicks. And you can reverse the process by placing a link on FB to take people to your Web site — if you provide an interesting reason to click.

Any relevant or encouraging music-related item found online can be posted as a link. Scott Robertson from NAMM sends an e-mail blast of these items every few days. You can usually find at least one to post, and you will look like the genius who found it. (Sorry, Scott.) Remember, it's better to make three posts over six days than three at a time. Tasteful jokes, especially musician jokes, can get a wonderful response and even more shares.

Also, dealers who post often about music, their students and music advocacy define themselves as passionate music supporters. And their friends will tell their friends when they click "share." Share clicks are how your message can go viral and how you add friends.

Facebook can be used to echo anything that appears in print or online about you, your staff or your suppliers. News is news, and everybody wants to know what's coming up next, so multiple posts of future events are fine.

My friends at Steinway Hall-Dallas had people guessing the number of parts in a Steinway grand. **People like polls (just don't be controversial) and contests.** And people like free stuff. A few dealers are using Facebook contests to give away tickets to local concerts and recitals.

Facebook is a great way to engage customers and prospects and enhance relationships — and again, it's free. It's an online party, and occasionally, friends say something foolish, but maybe the most foolish thing would be not having a Facebook fan page at all. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. You can visit his Facebook page by typing "Steinway Naples/Bonita Springs" into the search window.

+ FB DO'S & DON'TS

DO

- + Post pictures and videos.
- + Use the same manners you would use at a party.
- + Be interesting and relevant, but cast a wide net.
- + Post upcoming events and reviews after the events.
- + Drive people to your page by posting their pictures.
- + Post often but not too often.
- + Keep it close to home, and post about customers, students, teachers, staff and suppliers.
- + Link to and from your Web site.
- + Use contests and (non-controversial) polls.
- + Echo anything that appears about you or your staff in the press or online.
- + Keep personal and business fan pages separate.
- + Use the Message feature for semiprivate messages and overt sale promotions.
- + Check spelling and grammar.
- + Be informal.

DON'T

- ✗ Be too informal or brag.
- ✗ Post too often.
- ✗ Get political or controversial.
- ✗ Sound like a catalog.
- ✗ Post too many overt sales messages.
- ✗ Make personal posts on a business fan page.
- ✗ Forget to check spelling and grammar.
- ✗ Overlook the free opportunity Facebook presents.